

## Chapter 05

### **Let's Celebrate Belief**

#### **B is for belief, the foundation of life**

BY FRED HARDINGE

A professor announced to a brand new class of medical students: "I have good news and bad news: The good news is that half of the material you learn in medical school will survive all scrutiny and investigation. It will be enduring. The other half of what we teach you, however, will be proven incorrect. The bad news is we have no way of knowing which half is which!"

In today's world it's sometimes difficult to know what to believe about much of the information we're "fed"! One day we read that drinking alcohol is harmful. The next week other reports indicate that it's protective of good health. Chocolate is fattening, right? Wait a minute—now a research group has reported that it actually helps people lose weight. Coffee is harmful, we've been told. But then we learn that in a significant study those who drank large amounts of coffee lived longer! And one week a major tech company introduces another time-saving, "must have" device; the next week media report those claims as based on unreliable analyses.

In what or whom can we truly believe? Sometimes determining the answer to this question is tough! Yet, we all believe in something. Even the greatest skeptics have beliefs, even if it's the belief that no one can be trusted. The survival of all humans is based on beliefs of some kind. Belief is essential to human existence and organization.

#### **Power of Belief**

One day a physician was examining a patient who complained about a myriad of symptoms, unrelated to any known syndrome or disease complex. The patient told the doctor that perhaps an evil spell had been cast on him and was making him ill. The doctor then took two small glass tubes and filled one with hydrogen peroxide and the other with water. The patient didn't know the two liquids were different. The physician then drew a small amount of blood from the patient and put a few drops into the tube with the hydrogen peroxide. Naturally, there was an immediate reaction of effervescence, and the doctor knowingly nodded. "*Ah-ha*," he said, "you will benefit from this." He then gave the patient a saline injection and told him to wait in the waiting room.

After a short time the doctor called the patient back into his office and again drew a small amount of blood, this time putting a few drops into the tube containing plain water. As expected, it mixed without any reaction. The doctor told the patient that the evil spell had been broken, and the patient left feeling immensely better. The story goes that the patient told all his friends about how he had been healed, and many of them came to the doctor wanting the same treatment!

As this story demonstrates, there is tremendous power in belief. For many a peddler of "quack medicine," this phenomenon is a mighty source of revenue. Many "unscrupulous" salespersons create a false need in the minds of their targets. They then sell herbal concoctions, nonessential mineral supplements, nutraceuticals, special diets, and magnetic or electrical cures mediated through empty black boxes or mild shock-emitting equipment. They are trading on what can be called the "gullibility factor." For those who are healthy, the only cost is some money, from which they are soon parted. In a situation in which something such as cancer is involved, sometimes the delay before undertaking more

traditional treatment leads to a deadly outcome as well as the wasting of limited and precious resources on worthless “cure-alls.” It’s important to place our belief and trust in that which is reliable and not on such unproven methods.

Belief—or faith, within a religious setting—has been shown to have statistically significant benefits that exceed the placebo effect. When the religious experience of Americans who reached the age of 100 was studied, researchers found that religiosity significantly enhanced health. Although many questions are still unanswered, the benefits of trust in God result from more than simply attending religious services.<sup>1</sup>

A study comparing mortality rates between secular and religious kibbutzim (collective agricultural communities in Israel), found a decreased mortality rate over a 15-year follow-up in the religious group. The age-adjusted risk of premature death of members of the secular kibbutz was 1.8 times higher for males and 2.7 times higher for females when compared with the religious kibbutz.<sup>2</sup>

A study of African-Americans found that those who engaged in organized religious activities had improved health and life satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> Duke University researcher C. G. Ellison found that a lack of religious affiliation increases the risk of depression in African-Americans.<sup>4</sup>

A connection between social relationships and survival has been documented in several studies. C. J. Schoenbach, et al. have documented this effect, particularly among white males.<sup>5</sup>

### **Improved Quality of Life**

One of the most consistent findings across all racial groups is that spirituality profoundly improves the quality of life. Ellison describes these significant benefits, brought about by exercising faith:<sup>6</sup>

- Religious attendance and private devotion strengthen a person's religious belief system.
- Strong religious systems, when accompanied by a high level of religious certainty, have a substantial and positive influence on well-being.
- Individuals with strong religious faith report higher levels of life satisfaction, greater personal happiness, and fewer negative psychosocial consequences of traumatic life events.

Spirituality not only helps believers but also benefits the nonbelievers in their community. Research has found that communities gain health benefits when they have higher numbers of adherents to faiths that emphasize implicit obedience to God and His standards of conduct.<sup>7</sup> The reason that nonbelievers are benefitted as well is likely that their social norms favor conformity to the more healthful lifestyle embraced by their religious neighbors.

Religious people—particularly adolescents from religious homes who frequently attend religious services, pray, and read Scripture—have fewer problems with alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs than do their nonreligious peers.<sup>8</sup>

Religion was also positively associated with emotionally healthful values and socially accepted behaviors such as tutoring or other volunteer activities often promoted by religious organizations.<sup>9</sup>

Harold G. Koenig, M.D., discusses the findings of Idler and Kasl. These researchers

noted a connection between healthier emotional lives and closer social ties in religiously active people, which often resulted in lower levels of disability. The increased physical activity associated with leisure and social activities did not fully account for the increased benefits in these people's lifestyles, and the authors concluded: "A significant effect of religiousness remains even after social activities have been considered."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we find that belief in a loving God produces a very positive and powerful health-promoting state of mind. There is nothing more reassuring than the peace and satisfaction experienced by those who place their lives in the hands of a loving God and who are aware of His love for them. This brings health, happiness, and a sense of purpose. As the Bible says, "Those who love your instructions have great peace and do not stumble" (Ps. 119:165, NLT).<sup>11</sup>

## **Stress Issues**

Belief in God may be associated with reduction in stress, depression, and loneliness. A 1990 Gallup poll revealed that more than 36 percent of Americans live with chronic feelings of loneliness. According to a Princeton University Research Associates survey, at least two thirds of Americans feel stressed at least once a week. Stress, loneliness, and related depression can have serious consequences. Between 75 and 90 percent of all doctor visits contain components relating to stress.<sup>12</sup>

Medical science has discovered that when you feel stressed as a result of facing challenges, the negative emotions trigger the release of certain hormones that stimulate the nervous system in such a way as to put stress on the various organs of the body. If these organs are subjected to stress over long periods of time, they become weakened. Once

weakened, they are more susceptible to a variety of disease processes. The order and intensity with which organs are affected depend upon the person's heredity, constitution, environment, and lifestyle. For example:

- Stress may cause the release of adrenaline, making the heart beat more rapidly and powerfully. Such stress can cause one to suffer from heart palpitations (unpleasant awareness of heartbeat).
- When stress hormones cause the blood vessels to constrict, they may augment the effects of hypertension and cause diminished peripheral vascular flow, leading to cold hands and feet.
- Stress may induce shallow and rapid breathing with bronchial dilation, which causes hyperventilation.
- Stress results in diversion of the blood supply away from the digestive system, possibly affecting digestive processes.
- Stress induces a state of increased clotting of the blood; though protective in some circumstances, it could have detrimental effects in others.
- Chronic stressful conditions may increase perspiration, leading to unpleasant dampness.
- Stress causes an increase in blood glucose (to serve as a rapid source of energy); in those predisposed to diabetes, chronic stress may lead to the hastening of the onset or exacerbation of diabetes mellitus. Stress may cause alterations in gastrointestinal and urinary functions. Some may suffer from urinary frequency and irritable bowel syndrome.
- A stressed person may visit the doctor for numerous physical

complaints and suffer from emotional disorders such as anxiety, depression, phobias, cognitive disorders, memory problems, and sleep disorders.

### **Benefits of Prayer**

An Ohio study<sup>13</sup> examined the effects of prayer on well-being. Of the 560 respondents, 95 percent classified themselves as religious people; 54 percent were Protestants and 25 percent Catholics. Four types of prayer were identified:

1. Petitionary prayer: asking for material things you may need.
2. Ritual prayer: reading the book of prayers.
3. Meditative prayer: “feeling,” or being, in His presence.
4. Colloquial prayer: talking as to a friend and asking God for guidance in making decisions.

Of all these types of prayer, this study revealed that colloquial prayer correlates best with happiness and religious satisfaction; whereas, ritual prayer was associated with a negative effect producing feelings all the more sad, lonely, tense, and fearful. Talking to God as to a friend, telling Him all our joys and sorrows, can bring happiness, healing, and religious satisfaction. So important is the role of prayer in healing that Dr. Larry Dossey said, “I decided that not to employ prayer with my patients was the equivalent of withholding a potent drug or surgical procedure.”<sup>14</sup>

Many people have tried to solve their problems through yoga, secular meditation, or some similar internalized program of self-empowerment; however, these methods do not have the same effectiveness. In many cases they are techniques of self-hypnosis.

## **Spiritual and Moral Values**

Most civilizations have been founded on a set of beliefs and moral values that lead to an orderly society. Throughout the centuries belief in spiritual values has been a strong motivator to treat others well and to develop peaceful human relationships. History demonstrates that faithless and amoral societies become so corrupt that they cannot survive. Belief is fundamental to science as well as to religion. Just as faith in a scientific principle is verified, faith in God is validated when tests show that its application leads to correct conclusions and brings satisfying results. Studies indicate that those with regular spiritual practices who meet with a faith community live longer, live better, and are far less likely to have a stroke or heart attack. Faith can provide strength to overcome stress and destructive habits. Belief can give you peace of mind and enable you to reach your full potential through positive choices. Celebrate belief—it is the foundation of life!

## **Peace of Mind**

The Bible says, “You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!” (Isa. 26:3). When we have a close relationship with God, we experience peace of mind.

This does not mean that those who believe in God and trust Him implicitly will be free from problems. “Trouble and turmoil may surround us, yet we enjoy a calmness and peace of mind of which the world knows nothing. This inward peace is reflected in a . . . vigorous, glowing experience that stimulates all with whom we come in contact. The peace of the Christian depends not upon peaceful conditions in the world about him but upon the indwelling of the Spirit of God.”<sup>15</sup>



As nineteenth-century evangelist Dwight L. Moody is quoted by many as saying:

Trust in yourself, and you are doomed to disappointment.

Trust in your friends, and they will die and leave you.

Trust in money, and you may have it taken from you.

Trust in reputation, and some slanderous tongue may blast it.

But—trust in God, and you are never to be confounded in time or eternity.

Trusting in a loving, powerful God provides us with the ability to enjoy a healthful lifestyle. Belief and faith in God enables Him to fill our lives with abundant peace and joy.

## Life Application Questions

### Chapter 5—**Belief**

1. How gullible am I? What methods do I use when choosing what to believe? Which influences can I trust: the Internet, advertisements, research backed by vested interests, friends, past experience?
2. What benefits have I noticed by having faith in God? How well have I coped with stressful situations? Do I feel peaceful most of the time? Do I have a strong purpose in life? Is the community in which I live and work aware of this, and are they benefitting, as well? Are adolescents in my community better protected from disruptive and risky behaviors because of my association with them and the faith I exhibit?
3. Which of the effects of stress have I experienced? How many visits to physicians could possibly be related to my not having an ongoing, meaningful relationship of trust with my Savior? Do I need to spend more time growing my faith through the study of God's Word and association with those who have the same beliefs I do?
4. A classmate of Bruce from academy days has stopped attending church. He had a few bad experiences and doubts God's interest in his life situation. What would I have done if those things had happened to me? Would my faith have been stronger? How can I encourage Bruce? Can I choose to start a fellowship group or small-group Bible study? What particularly encouraging experiences can I share with him?

5. Which of the four types of prayer do I practice most often? In what ways can I change my prayer habits in order to become more joyful and inwardly peaceful even amid tumultuous events?

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Levin, H. Y. Vanderpool, "Is frequent religious attendance really conducive to better health? Toward an epidemiology of religion," *Social Science and Medicine*, 1987; 24(7): pp. 589-600.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. Kark, et al. *American Journal of Public Health*, 1996: 86(3); pp. 341-346.

<sup>3</sup> J. S. Levin, L. M. Chatters, R. J. Taylor, "Religious effects on health status and life satisfaction among black Americans," *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 1995 May;50(3): pp. S154-163.

<sup>4</sup> C. G. Ellison, "A Race, Religious Involvement and Depressive Symptomatology in a South Eastern US Community," *Social Science and Medicine*, 1995:40(11); pp. 1561-1572.

<sup>5</sup> V. J. Shoenback, et al. "Social Ties and Mortality in Evans County GA," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 1986; 123: pp. 577-591.

<sup>6</sup> C. G. Ellison, "Religious involvement and subjective well-being," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 1991 Mar;32(1): pp. 80-99.

<sup>7</sup> J. W. Dwyer, L. L. Clarke, M. K. Miller, "The effect of religious concentration and affiliation on county cancer mortality rates," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 1990 Jun;31(2): pp. 185-202.

<sup>8</sup> H. G. Koenig, *The Healing Power of Healing Faith*, p.72, 1999 Quoting P H Hardestyn and K M Kirby. "Relation Between Family Religious and Drug Use Within Adolescent Peer Groups," *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 10:(1) 1995; pp. 42-30.

<sup>9</sup> Amoatin and S. J. Bahr, "Religion, Family and Adolescent Drug Use," *Social Perspectives* 29:(1) 1986; pp. 53-76.

<sup>10</sup> H. G. Koenig, *The Healing Power of Faith* (Simon & Schuster: April, 1999), p. 177.

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<sup>12</sup> J. Marks, "A Time Out," *U.S. News & World Report*, Dec. 11, 1995: pp. 85-97.

<sup>13</sup> *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 1991; 19(1): pp. 71-83.

<sup>14</sup> L. Dossey, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1993) p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Hagerstown, Md., Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966), p. 203.